Raymond Jackson

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Newark, New Jersey
Diagnosed in 1991

Malcolm X once said, “I do not pretend to be a divine man, but I do believe in divine power, divine guidance, and in the fulfillment of divine prophesy. I am not well educated nor am I an expert in any particular field—but I am sincere, and my sincerity is my credentials.”

I was an intravenous drug user in the early to mid-1980s, and I believe I contracted HIV somewhere around 1983 or 1984. I’m certain I’ve been HIV positive for at least 30 years, but I wasn’t diagnosed until 1991, and I have been incarcerated since then.

In 1984, I was sentenced to 10 years for multiple automobile thefts. I served five years. During that period, I became so frustrated with the course of my life that I finally submitted to God. I knew I was destined for better things. In high school I made the honor roll consistently, but I valued the streets more than education so I dropped out. I decided to join the Army, but once there, I was too young to adjust and I really missed the streets, so I was honorably discharged. Somehow I made it to college, where I made the dean’s list two semesters in a row but never earned a degree. I had never really completed anything in my life and I was sick and tired of going to jail.

One day, while in prison, I prayed for a wife. I met a beautiful Christian young lady. She made me feel complete, and after my release from prison, we were married. Everything seemed fine for the first couple years, until my wife got pregnant, and in her eighth month, I got sick. I went to the doctor and he discovered some white bumps on my larynx. He then did a complete blood work-up, which revealed I was HIV positive. My CD4 cell count was very low and I was told I must have contracted the virus much earlier. I was given a projection of three to five years to live. I was devastated.

I needed to talk about this. That’s how I cope with difficulties in my life. I have never cared too much about other people’s opinions, but I wasn’t in this alone, so I suppressed my secret. That drove me crazy, and I started drinking and using drugs again. I picked up a gun for the first time in my life with the intent to use it illegally. I lost my job and started stealing. When I finally awoke from my drugged, drunken stupor, I was in prison again.

In prison, I hid my status. I was too ashamed to let anyone in on my “dirty little secret.” How did I have a “gay disease”? This kept me from taking medication for years. AZT and DDI were the only

ones on the market back then, and they were easily recognizable. I felt I had to hide, even if it cost me my life.

In 1997, my CD4s were below 100 and my viral load was in the millions. What I thought was a scrape over my left eye turned out to be a shingle, which I didn't know until the entire right side of my body was suddenly paralyzed. I was rushed to the hospital and told that I needed to take medications or die.

I remember going to church one morning at New Jersey State Prison (then known as Trenton State Prison) and there was a gay guy, Mike, who gave his testimony about being HIV positive. I didn't know him but I felt for him. I knew that his testimony, as much as it was a plea for acceptance, would get him ostracized by a large portion of the church. Yes, even people of God would stigmatize people living with HIV, even though the disease affects every segment of society. At that time, most churches just ignored the HIV ravaging our communities. It was the 800-pound gorilla that no one wanted to talk about.

At the prison, there was a group of about 20 men who were scheduled to be baptized, Mike and I among them. I still hadn't revealed my status to anyone. Sitting next to me, Mike told me that all the guys had been asking to be baptized before him because he was HIV positive. I looked over at him and said, "Don't worry about it. You can go before me." His face lit up; at that moment, I afforded him a tacit degree of acceptance. I really wanted to share my status with him, and tell him that I admired him for the courage it took to give such testimony, but I didn't. It was some months later that I finally revealed to Mike that I was HIV positive, and he and I have been close friends ever since.

I was eventually transferred to East Jersey State Prison (then known as Rahway State Prison), where I continued my masquerade. I seemed to have gotten better, though I still wasn't taking my medications regularly. I was singing in the choir and attending all the church functions; I was the Christian's Christian.

About two years into my stay at East Jersey, Mike was transferred there, too. He again gave his testimony and I embraced him. I hadn't forgotten that he had been my confidant and encouragement. Although we stayed on opposite sides of the prison, wild rumors about how close we seemed started circulating among the Christian population. They just couldn't seem to get it. I was lifting all the weight in the yard and appeared to be the picture of health, Mike was a scrawny gay guy with HIV, and yet we were good friends.

The rumors eventually grew so loud that I decided I either needed to put some distance between Mike and me or disclose my HIV status. It was an easy decision for me; scary, but easy. Mike was like my little brother and I would never turn my back on him. My chaplain, Rev. Rufus McClendon, who was more like a father to us, gave me the latitude to give my testimony for however long I needed. He had no idea that I was HIV positive, but he trusted that I had to share something important.

As I shared my story of drug abuse, being diagnosed with HIV, and my eventual downfall, I also expressed my extreme disappointment with the rumors swirling around the church, especially from people who had known me for years. Aren't we as Christians supposed to be more loving than that? I also made sure that I acknowledged Mike, who had been a pillar of strength, a confidant, and a help to me. I made sure everyone knew that he was not only my friend, but my brother, and that would never change.

By the time I was done there wasn't a dry eye in the church. As Christians, we have a higher calling, but sometimes we fall far short of it. But the church is doing much better these days.

I thank Rev. McClendon for allowing me the platform to share my story back in 1999. I thank the congregation at East Jersey for embracing me and encouraging me to be strong in the Lord and start taking care of myself. And I give a special thanks to my brother Mike, my friend forever.

Although I'm still incarcerated, I am doing tremendous. My CD4 count remains above 500, and my viral load has been undetectable since 2004. Taking your medications regularly and learning to accept your diagnosis are the keys to that. It has little to do with miracles or money, although some blessings are involved. God's word says that He causes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust. It isn't a Christian thing; it's called grace, the unmerited favor of God.

In 2003 and 2004, I was trained by the Hyacinth AIDS Foundation in HIV/AIDS pathogenesis. I have also been trained as a peer counselor, one-on-one counselor and group facilitator by multiple organizations. I love being able to give to those in need. It has given me purpose in my life, something I never had before. The most rewarding experience I've ever had was to be trained as a palliative care volunteer. Being able to share the experience of life, honesty and the acceptance of finality with individuals who knew that their time was limited has been an overwhelming blessing for me. But my greatest gift has been salvation.

Even in prison, amid all manner of chaos, education can help you ward off a lot of the stigma that is still attached to HIV. It can also help you in becoming comfortable with yourself. It's hard for people to overcome their fear of those of us living with HIV, especially when we are afraid to accept ourselves. It was difficult for the little boy in me to learn how to become a man and confront the reality of being HIV positive. But thanks to courageous people like Mike, and loving people like Rev. McClendon, I can finally say that I've completed something in my life. Acceptance is positive.

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